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ABSTRACT

Arguing for a "taxonomic approach" to the determination of the meaning of "rhetoric," this paper first indicates the need for renewed speculation about the ordering of knowledge as a whole. It then indicates the importance of general taxonomies for understanding rhetoric, illustrates its position with a pair of modern taxonomies, and concludes by suggesting some criteria for such taxonomies. (FL)

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THE MISSION of CONTEMPORARY RHETORIC:

A TAXONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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I believe that an essential element of the mission of contemporary Rhetoric is determining the meaning of "rhetoric" by establishing the boundaries of the art and its relationship to other arts and sciences. As a preface to this undertaking, we should note that two approaches are available. On the one hand, we could begin by stipulating a definition of "rhetoric" and proceed by listing similarities and differences of the stipulated concept and our conceptions of other arts and sciences. This appears to have been the procedure employed by most writers who have ventured an opinion on the subject in recent years and the outcomes of such procedures are well illustrated in selected writings of A. Craig Baird, Donald C. Bryant, Hoyt Hudson, and others. Unfortunately the appeal of such outcomes is limited to those who share the initial conception. Others may ignore the conclusions as being irrelevant to the real meaning of "rhetoric."

On the other hand, we can begin by exploring means for ordering knowledge in general and allow a concept of Rhetoric to emerge as a species of the general category "knowledge" or "art." In employing this procedure, statements concerning the relationship between Rhetoric and other arts emerge as a byproduct of the general taxonomy. And, the appeal of the resulting conception of Rhetoric is a product of the taxonomy, thereby both strengthening and clarifying the object of our interest.

For reasons that will become evident, I suspect the second alternative offers greater promise than the first. I call this alternative a "taxonomic approach" and present this essay as an argument on its behalf. In what follows, I will first indicate the need for renewed speculation about the ordering of knowledge as a whole, indicate the importance of general taxonomies for understanding Rhetoric, illustrate my position with a pair of modern taxonomies, and conclude by suggesting some criteria on which we should insist.

NEED for RENEWED SPECULATION

The concept of Rhetoric was once understood with greater clarity than today. However, the clarity resulted not from the precision of the art itself, but from the order of educational and cultural systems of which it was an element. Scholars enrolled in a liberal arts course during the middle ages accepted "discourse" as a primative term characterizing the subject matter of the trivium. Rhetoric was distinguished from her sister arts as an art concerned with persuasive uses of discourse while Grammar and Logic respectively were concerned with textual analysis and analytic judgment. Of course, there were tensions in this neatly ordered package, but the outlines were well understood and generally accepted. The concept of "Rhetoric" received both approbation and clarity as a

consequence of its participation in the clearly ordered unit of education.

The demise of this clear package can be traced to the expansion of knowledge categories, and to this expansion is attributable much of the confusion concerning Rhetoric today. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the search for humanitas had disordered the received curriculum. The seventeenth century witnessed emergence of the physical sciences which were added to the curriculum and entered into the encyclopedic classifications by theorists such as Bacon and Hobbes. The nineteenth century added social sciences as distinct categories which secured a place in the order of knowledge through the positive philosophy of August Comte. And claims of German speculative thinkers secured the autonomy of aesthetics. The contribution of our own century has been the behavioral sciences which continue to be a major destabilizing influence.

This brief history should be sufficient to display the unsystematic emergence of new knowledge categories. Although reforms have been undertaken from time to time, the result of historical accretion is a disorganized concept of knowledge in which particular arts are distributed over four or five nonexclusive categories. Recognized divisions include physical sciences, biological sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Behavioral sciences are said to be "some of" the social sciences and the fine arts are

variously attributed to the humanities and social sciences.

That this situation calls for systematic speculation, I believe is axiomatic. For those who do not share my belief, I offer two observations. First, the growth of interdisciplinary projects and pseudodisciplines indicates that the existing structures no longer reflect human needs and interests. Robert Merton may disagree with my interpretation, but his statement of the problem is unmistakable.

> Now it is important to note that all this does not result from the cultish belief that it is good to "interdisciplinize," that a togetherness of men with diverse intellectual antecedents is simply a good thing. Instead, these consolidations have come about because different but related bodies of knowledge have been found indispensible to investigate effectively new-found or long-unsolved problems of animal and human behavior.*

Second, I observe that such curricular structures do not recognize a concept of effective communication apart from the subject matter communicated. The result is a predictable scattering of rhetorical concepts over a variety of disciplines. I'm sure your own experiences provide ample support for this claim. If not, consider the following instances. At all but a handful of institutions, instruction in discourse is divided between Speech and English departments, and many programs in Mass

*"The Mosaic of the Behavioral Sciences," in Bernard Berelson, ed., The Behavioral Sciences Today (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), p. 254.

Communication, Journalism, and Management offer isolated courses of instruction. Moreover, subject matter experts in Rhetoric are as likely to be found in History and Philosophy departments as in those specializing in Discursive arts.

The situation described above persists only because it is often assumed that general categories are mere conveniences which do not alter the substance of the items contained. This extreme nominalist position is the object of my attack in the following section.

IMPORTANCE of GENERAL TAXONOMIES

Most nonphilosophers find it easy to avoid discussion of such abstract concepts as "knowledge in general" and "the order of knowledge." And, lest there be any mistaking my position, I readily admit that my concern for systems of knowledge is both highly abstract and a genuinely philosophical problem. However, this is an instance in which resolution of the problem has immediate consequences for Rhetoric and rhetoricians. Specifically, I believe taxonomies of knowledge determine what Rhetoric is, specify critical features of the art, and impose conditions of meaning and verification of statements about the art.

My first claim is that taxonomies of knowledge determine what Rhetoric is. In this regard, we should observe a fundamental distinction between knowing what something is and knowing what something does. Thus, recent literature has told us a great deal about what Rhetoric does, and also a bit about who uses it. For example, Rhetoric overcomes alienation, promotes identification, maintains political and social communities, secures order, produces persuasion, studies misunderstanding, produces knowledge, and so forth. It does these things in service of social movements, the new left, the old right, women's liberation, minority activists, philosophers, scientists, and so forth. As fascinating as these findings are, none of them tell us what Rhetoric is. To answer the question, "what is Rhetoric?" we need to place it in a more general class of related items and then mark the boundaries of each. Such procedure presupposes a general taxonomy of knowledge.

Second, texonomies of knowledge specify critical features of the objects contained in each category. Any system of classification emphasizes certain attributes and relations while disregarding or demoting others. As a result, the choice between competing systems predetermines the characteristics of individual arts which are taken to be fundamental or defining. For example, Aristotle's system emphasized the affinities between Rhetoric and Dialectic, and thereby predetermined emphasis on quasilogical modes of proof. In contrast, Bacon's reliance upon a psychological

model noting the faculties affected by various arts reduced Rhetoric to an art of adornment within the broader canon of transmission. Similarly, Reid's placement of Rhetoric among the Fine Arts preselected expression to be an essential characteristic and presaged elements of romantic theory.

Finally, both the meaning of rhetorical concepts and the criteria for their validation depend on the ontological category to which the art is assigned. Bacon observed that "invention" has a different meaning in Rhetoric than in science and contemporary writers have generalized his claim to all concepts. Hayden V. White summarizes this element in the thought of the "poststructuralist" historian, Foucault, as follows:

> Foucault maintains that, even though the terminology of, let us say, the natural historians of the eighteenth century and that of the biologists of the nineteenth century may contain the same lexical elements (which would seem to justify the search for "analogies," "influences," "traditions" and the like), the differences between the "syntaxes" of eighteenth-century natural history and nineteenth-century biology are so great as to make any lexical similarities between them trivial as evidence. And so too with the sciences of language and economics developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. Between the search for a "general grammar" of the earlier period and the "philology" of the later there is as little continuity as there is between the "analysis of wealth" carried out during the Enlightenment and the "science of economics" cultivated in our own time. And this because the analysists of "life," "labor," and "language" of the two epochs inhabited different "universes of discourse," cultivated different modes of representation" and remained captives of different conceptions of the nature of the relationships obtaining between "things" on the one side and "words" on the other.+

William Oliver Martin introduces a similar problem by recognizing a number of questions which arise from uncertainty in assigning claims to a category, and then observes that the questions must be answered "prior to the determination of the truth or falsity of a proposition." Because, he says,

> Only by first knowing which of the . . . alternatives is the case can one know what kind of evidence it is that will be relevant to the demonstration of the truth or falsity of the proposition. If this fact is not recognized, discussion can be endless and, of course, fruitless.*

CONTEMPORARY ILLUSTRATIONS

The desire to impose a general order on accumulated wisdom is an old one and few theorists have been immune to its influence. Two twentieth century thinkers who have succumbed to this ideal are Ernst Cassirer and Talcott Parsons. They are well known to you, but probably not in this context. Although the fundamental principles ordering their systems are irreconcilably different, they provide convenient means of illustrating the options open to us.

+"Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," History and Theory, 12 (1973), 29.

*The Order and Integration of Knowledge (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), p. 5.

While completing a monograph on Einstein, Cassirer began to feel that the studies of individual sciences had broad implications for the general problem of knowledge. He came to believe that the sciences have a symbiotic relationship to one another such that studies of each discipline add depth and breadth to the others. Efforts to explicate the relationships between different domains of knowledge became a consuming passion which occupied the final three decades of his life and resulted in publication of several works including the monumental Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

Cassirer soon recognized that traditional metaphysics could not provide the direction he sought and turned his attention to symbolic processes through which men comprehend their environment. He maintains that the understanding constructs new forms to master problems it encounters and that only study of these forms can "make good the claim of unity and universality" necessary to master the "various modes and directions of our knowledge."* Study of these forms revealed three domains of experience including primative, expressive world of myths and religions, the intuitive world expressed in common languages, and the conceptual realm of pure science. Although his early statements suggest evolutionary development from one stage

*The Logic of the Humanities, trans. Clarence Smith Howe (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 67.

to the next, Cassirer's mature work avoids the genetic fallacy and recognizes the three as distinct realms of activity. These realms are irreducible and give rise to distinct "universes of discourse." Each universe consists of a distinct brand of knowledge characterized by its own internal dynamic and governed by unique logical or quasilogical operations.

For Cassirer, Rhetoric is an art of symbolism deeply imbedded in human consciousness. In terms of his taxonomy, it is an art of intuition which employs the common sense categories of experience maintained by ordinary language. For us, this is a familiar classification because it places Rhetoric at the midpoint between the expressive and mythical proclamations of poetry and the fine arts, on the one hand; and the abstract concepts of pure science, on the other. However, Rhetoric is also captive to ordinary language and subject to its inherent limitations. "The symbolism of number," Cassirer argues, "is of quite a different logical type from the symbolism of speech. In language we find the first efforts of classification, but these are still uncoordinated. They cannot lead to a true systematization. For the symbols of language themselves have no definite systematic order."*

*An Essay on Man (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1944), p. 211.

Whereas Cassirer bases his system on the symbolic processes employed in interpreting the environment, Parrsons claims to be an "analytic realist." This is an important claim because he presents his system as one employing categories determined by the phenomena themselves. These categories are three in number: NATURE SYSTEMS, ACTION SYSTEMS, and CULTURE SYSTEMS. Nature systems are those primarily concerned with spacio-temporal relationships and the category includes the physical and biological sciences. Culture systems are the least precise and are assigned a "special status" in which neither space nore time are critical factors. Examples include Logic and Mathematics.

Rhetoric is not mentioned, but would be placed among the action systems which mediate between nature and culture. The mediatory role of actions system results from three particulars. First, the actions systems accept tenets of both nature and culture systems as unquestionable or objective data. Second, action systems are explicitly concerned with means-end relationships, but the means are spacio-temporal factors of nature systems and the ends are unbounded concerns of culture systems. Finally, a reciprocal relationship exists between action and other systems in that actions may create or alter elements of other systems while being confined by them.

Analysis of action systems displays four components with which most of us should feel rather comfortable: acts, actors, situations, and relationships between them. Although these components are familiar to us, Parsons superimposes on them a distinction between "analytic" and "historical" disciplines, and it is this distinction that identifies the unique character of Rhetoric. Rhetoric is an historical discipline and this differentiates it from such kindred social disciplines as Economics, Politics, and Sociology. These latter are analytical sciences and their aim is to "develop logically coherent systems" without reference to particular individuals or classes. Such closed systems of theory constitute independent sciences because they are "not translatable into terms of" other analytic sciences.

In contrast, Rhetoric and the other historical sciences resist closure and focus on concrete cases. Parsons explains that:

> The object of the [historical sciences] is to attain the fullest possible understanding of a class of concrete historical individuals or of one of the class. This distinction holds regardless of whether the historical individual concerned is a natural object or event, a human individual, an act or system of acts, a system of social relations or a type of social group. In each case the explanation in question will involve, by implication if not explicitly, reference to the theoretical categories of one or more analytical sciences.*

Thus for Parsons, Rhetoric is an historical science of action examining acts, actors, situations, and their relationships for the purpose of explaining particular events. In undertaking this task, Rhetoric accepts nature and culture as unquestionable materia. It employs findings of the analytical sciences of action, but gives them concrete termination in particular cases of interest.

CRITERIA

Neither Cassirer's nor Parsons' system is fully representative of our interests. I outlined them merely as illustrations of my claim that such orderings affect our understanding of Rhetoric. However, several other systems may present themselves, and attention to the factors regulating our choice between them seems a fitting conclusion. It seems to me that our common interest in Rhetoric should predispose us to favor taxonomies exhibiting three general characteristics.

First, we should favor taxonomies based on principles of general appeal. This I take to be a matter of practical necessity because a conceptual ordering is of less than academic interest if noone adheres to it. Moreover, it is

*The Structure of Social Action (2nd ed.; New York: The Free Press, 1949), p. 760.

unlikely to serve our interests if it is disregarded by our colleagues now assigned to other disciplines and if ignored by the populace in whose interest we explore intellectual concerns.

Second, we should favor taxonomies which assign Rhetoric to an explicit and honored status. Historically, certain epistemic divisions have proven themselves to be utterly inimical to our interests and we should do well to avoid their application. Particularly unpleasant orderings impose radical distinctions between appearance and reality, knowledge and opinion, symbols and events, form and content. While not universally disabling, taxonomies based on such principles have had disasterous consequences for the notion of Rhetoric and we should seek more desirable alternatives.

Finally, we should favor taxonomies which recognize the unity of our traditional concerns. This desire motivated Burke's efforts to reclaim the rhetorical components usurped by the "new sciences" and much of the recovery remains to be undertaken. Precise definition of our "traditional concerns" may be as difficult as defining Rhetoric itself, but attention to the classical canons points the way to several areas in which we may wish to assert ourselves. For example, renewed attention to delivery should remind us of the essentially rhetorical nature of Sociolinguistics, and of elements of Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology.